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ABSTRACT

The marriage of the humanities to public discussion of major current issues is an invitation to understand how various points of view are embedded in one's history, values, visions of the future, and an understanding of what is right, wrong, and necessary. The essays in this volume examine three issues: abortion, economic competition, and racial equality. Each topical essay is followed by a commentary. The essays include: "The Abortion Controversy: A Historical View" (Linda Gordon); Commentary (Judith Winzeler); "Economic Pessimism and Material Prosperity" (Michael Bernstein); Commentary (Ronald Means); and "Equality for Black Americans" (Eric Anderson); Commentary (Francine C. Cary). A directory of the State Humanities Councils is included. (DB)

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The Humanities and the Art of Public Discussion

Volume 2

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THE HUMANITIES AND THE ART OF PUBLIC DISCUSSION

Volume 2

Essays and Commentaries on

THE ABORTION CONTROVERSY,

ECONOMIC COMPETITION,

AND RACIAL EQUALITY

by Linda Gordon, Judith Winzeler
Michael Bernstein, Ronald Means
Eric Anderson, and Francine C. Cary

A project sponsored by
the Federation of State Humanities Councils
in partnership with
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FEDERATION OF
STATE HUMANITIES
COUNCILS

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FOREWORD

"One man is no man," says an ancient Greek proverb, conveying a world of meaning as true today as two thousand years ago. We receive our identity from the total of all our interrelations with other human beings—at first in families, then in communities, and then in the many wider associations we make as we go about living our lives. Without our connections to others, we are nothing.

The ancients also understood that when one person joins with others, inevitably the result is an activity called "politics." In ancient Greece, politics was a noble calling that belonged to all people; it was a never-ending business. Community without politics was unimaginable. Plutarch stated it eloquently:

> They are wrong who think that politics is like an ocean voyage, or a military campaign, something to be done with a particular end in view, something which leaves off as soon as that end is reached. It is not a public chore, to be got over with. It is a way of life....It is not simply office-holding, it is not just keeping your place, not just raising your voice from the floor, not just ranting on the rostrum with speeches and motions....Politics and philosophy are alike....All your life, all your time, in everything you do, whatever you are doing, is the time for philosophy. And so also it is of politics.

Today, unfortunately, politics has for many taken on something of an unsavory image. It is now seldom seen as a way of life in which

all of us have roles to play, but rather as an arena in which self-interested players scramble for power and seek to shape opinion. There is nothing wrong with opinion—unless it rules us. Then we become ignorant. The Humanities offer one important venue for exercising our citizenship. They allow us to look at major issues of public policy through a lens other than "opinion." They enable us to be wise citizens.

Philosophy, as Plutarch uses the word (and we may as well substitute "the Humanities"), asks us to take our opinion and hold it up to a light of critical examination. To look beneath the surface of our opinions and ask how we came to them. To consider facts, and to consider also why some things are facts and why others, though people may claim they are facts, are not. To think about how our beliefs relate to the personal sense we each have of our own well-being—and to the wellbeing of our community.

The marriage of the Humanities to public discussion of major issues of our day, therefore, is an invitation to understand how the points of view that we each hold are embedded in our history, in our values, in our vision of the future, and in the knowledge we carry with us about what is right, what is wrong, and what is necessary.

The essays in this book examine three issue areas: abortion, economic competition, and racial equality. The essays are reflective and as such do not offer answers, though they invite us to think about our own. When you have read, and when you have thought, and when you have engaged in a public discussion, you may feel as if you have just completed a journey. Perhaps you will arrive at exactly the point, in terms of your views and your thinking, from which you departed. Perhaps you will arrive at another place. Whichever is the case, remember what Plutarch said: the journey is never completed—it is always just beginning.

These essays are the second in an annual series being produced by the Federation of State Humanities Councils that will bring to the

American public some of the distinctive views and approaches of the humanities to urgent issues of the day. The themes are those being discussed in the 1990-91 National Issues Forums, locally initiated meetings and study circles that take place each year in communities across the nation, using materials prepared and published by the Kettering Foundation and the Public Agenda Foundation. We would like to express our appreciation to each author for their contributions.

Humanities councils in each state (see pages 45-47 for a complete listing) are private nonprofit organizations that make small grants to support humanities programs for the public in communities across the country. They receive funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and other sources. Many humanities councils make grants to support thoughtful discussion about public policy from the perspective of the humanities. For further information, contact the humanities council in your state, or the Federation.

Jamil S. Zainaldin
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Humanities Councils

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THE ABORTION CONTROVERSY: A HISTORICAL VIEW

Linda Gordon

IN MAY OF 1990 I WAS LECTURING IN POLAND during that country's first free local elections since the fall of Communist one-party rule. I found that the most hotly debated issue was abortion rights. It seemed at first surprising that Poland and the U.S. would be the two countries in which the legality of abortion was the leading controversy, because our countries are so different. While the U.S. is heterogeneous, Poland is religiously and ethnically homogeneous: as a result of the Holocaust, Poland has few minorities, and 96 percent of its population are believing Catholics. Poland is very much a peasant society, the poorest of the Warsaw Pact countries; it is just emerging from a Communist dictatorship and has had very few years of experience with democracy. The U.S. has been the world's leading industrial power for decades and, along with a few Western-European countries, the leading democracy.

The similarity in the two countries' concern with abortion suggests that the fundamental issues are very deep and not associated with any particular religion or political tradition. Perhaps an historical background can best explain the international rise of the abortion controversy in the late 20th century.

Abortion is an ancient practice; it is only *controversy* about abortion that is new. It has been difficult for anthropologists to find any society in which abortion was not practiced. It is probably practiced proportionally less in modern than in ancient societies because of the development of contraception as an alternative means of reproduction control. There have been no societies in which people did not attempt to control their fertility, for a variety of reasons including economic and physical well-being, not only of parents but of children and other community members, during periods of resource shortages. Abortion's history cannot be discussed outside the general history of birth control.

Ancient abortion techniques varied from the relatively safe and effective to the dangerous and ineffective. Potions taken by mouth were usually in the latter category; those that worked usually did so by causing an abortion only as a side-effect of systemic poisoning, as in the case of strong cathartics. Better methods usually involved the insertion of a foreign object into the uterus, causing it to expel its contents. Smooth stones or carefully smoothed sticks, for example, were used for this purpose.

Although different societies had different regulations about abortion, the most common view throughout the world, until two hundred years ago, was that abortion was legal and moral until "quickening," the moment when a woman reported that she could feel the fetus moving. ("Quickening" may occur over a wide range of time but is usually felt between the fourth and fifth month of pregnancy.) This understanding was common in a wide variety of cultures and religions, suggesting that the quickening rule served widespread needs. It removed abortion from the realm of controversy by allowing its propriety to depend entirely on a woman's own report, and it encouraged early rather than late abortions, a decisive health advantage for people without access to modern medicine.

Abortion has also been very much a "women's issue" because of the universality of the social pattern that women raise children as well as give birth to them. Women's responsibility for parenting gives them greater incentive to control reproduction. For example, despite the recent romanticization of so-called "natural childbirth," childbearing in the past was extremely risky and very often resulted in death or injury to the pregnant woman; abortion, despite its crude techniques, was far safer than childbirth. Abortion was practiced for both social and individual reasons—that is, for the sake of family and community as well as for parents—although in most real-life situations, the two types of reasons could be hard to distinguish, since a whole family might suffer from the exhaustion of a mother. In premodern societies reproduction control was widely considered a woman's natural right.[1]

At a time when most people earned their living through farming, large families were an asset because children contributed more to the family economy than they cost. As industrialization proceeded, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, smaller families gradually became more desirable and public use of various birth-control techniques, including abortion, probably became more frequent. In

response, regulation of abortion was becoming more lenient around the year 1800. Popular books of household hints, home medical guides, and even cookbooks published recipes for herbal abortifacients (abortion-causing teas and potions). Midwives and other community healers regularly performed abortions. The evidence suggests that most abortion decisions were made jointly by a man and a woman, unless the impregnator of the woman had deserted.

By 1840 in the U.S. there was increasing evidence that the numbers of abortions had grown, as it became more and more difficult for urban working people without access to land to support large families. The alternatives to abortion in the U.S. were not plentiful at this time: some men practiced withdrawal before ejaculation, and some women used spermicidal douches. But in general during the period from 1840 to 1920 the need for birth limitation outstripped the available contraceptive remedies, and abortion therefore increased. The fact that abortion remained safer than childbirth also contributed to its widespread practice.

The first campaigns against abortion began in most Western countries in the early 1800s, simultaneous with expanded abortion use. These anti-abortion campaigns peaked around 1870, and by about 1880 most European countries and most states in the U.S. had passed anti-abortion laws. The campaigns made several arguments against abortion. First, they noted that the typical woman having an intentional abortion was not, or was no longer, a single woman trying to cope with the shame of an illegitimate pregnancy in a society which had at that time a strong double standard in which nonmarital sexual activity was acceptable for men but condemned for women. Rather, she was a married woman—frequently even a middle-class, prosperous and hence "respectable" woman—who already had several children and wanted no more. The anti-abortion reformers, who were themselves virtually all from this privileged social group, objected more to women of their own class taking such measures than they had when they assumed the practice was confined to the poor. These anti-abortion spokesmen were precursors of a line of thought that by the 1890s came to be called eugenics. Eugenics referred to the alleged "science" of human breeding. These reformers believed that the elite classes were hereditarily superior, and they feared that if elite women reduced their fertility, the "inferior" elements of the population would grow disproportionately. They wanted to prohibit abortion among the elite in order to maintain the dominance of the white Protestant elite,

as opposed to the new immigrants, often Catholic, and the rural poor who had more children.[2]

Second, anti-abortion reformers were reacting to the first women's rights movement and believed that abortion was a means by which women sought to free themselves from full-time domesticity to become publicly active. Anti-abortionists bemoaned the new trends towards women's education, women's employment, and above all, women's claim to legal rights such as the vote. In fact, the women suffragists and other feminists at the time declared themselves opposed to abortion, although some of them may have privately supported it in particularly needy cases. The difference between feminists and those active in the anti-abortion campaign was that the former advocated control over reproduction in principle—they called their program "voluntary motherhood"—using other methods of birth control. Anti-abortionists at this time condemned *all* forms of birth control, including contraception. As historian John Mohr noted, "the most common variant of the view that abortion was a manifestation of the women's rights movement" was visible in the use of the term "fashion." Women who sought legal rights were deemed to be self-indulgent, in love with fashion and "fast living." They denied their destiny, rather than accepting maternity and domesticity as their life's work. Anti-abortion reformers believed it was appropriate to use the law to prevent women from straying from their assigned social place.

It is striking that the first campaign against abortion did not emphasize that a fetus should have rights. This argument was occasionally used, as evidenced in the use of the term "foeticide," for example. But this term was used to condemn all forms of birth control, not just abortion. And the defense of a fetus' rights was much less common than it is today and less common than expressions of fears about women's rights or the hereditary decline of the "race." Catholic anti-abortion activism, which did view abortion as murder, came only after Protestant-led crusades had been running for several decades. The first Catholic denunciation of abortion appeared in 1869. (The leading anti-abortionists of the 19th century were, as mentioned above, inclined towards prejudice against Catholics.) The Catholic position was absolute: "The murder of an infant before its birth is [not] allowed, under any circumstances...not even for the sake of preserving her [the mother's] own life."[3]

The anti-abortion campaign of the last century won its crowning

victory in 1873 in the "Comstock Law," which was "an Act for the Suppression of Trade in and Circulation of Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use." This federal law, named for the head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, banned obscene materials, in which it included any information about or device for contraception or abortion. Anthony Comstock got himself appointed as a special agent of the federal government empowered to ferret out violators of the law. He primarily went after those who advertised their services in newspapers and journals—a common practice until this time—and his efforts succeeded in forcing abortionists underground.

Abortion was then illegal in the U.S. for about a century, although its practice did not appear to decline. Enforcement of the prohibition varied greatly, not only from state to state but even from neighborhood to neighborhood. As waves of public concern rose and fell, as particular district attorneys sought campaign issues, police enforcement and conviction rates swung between laxity and strictness for a variety of national and local reasons.

Meanwhile, other birth-control practices were changing rapidly. Condoms became widely available and in World War I were distributed by the U.S. Government to the Navy. Since this male contraceptive could provide protection against venereal disease as well as conception, it could be classified as not obscene and removed from the purview of the Comstock Act. Starting in the second decade of this century, a widespread popular movement for the legalization of contraception succeeded in creating in public opinion, for the first time, a distinction between abortion and contraception. In the 1920s, states began legalizing contraception, although it was not until the 1960s that the last states did so. And it was only in 1970, three years before *Roe v. Wade*, that the Supreme Court in *Griswold v. Connecticut* ruled that states could not prohibit access to contraception. Starting in the 1920s, the common contraceptives were diaphragms and condoms. In 1960, hormonal anticontraception pills were introduced and were so popular that within a year one million women used them; intrauterine devices (IUD's) appeared later in the decade. By the 1970s the vast majority of American women used contraception. In the 1980s, the proportion of sexually active fertile women aged 15 to 44 not using some form of contraception (including surgical sterilization) was down to six percent.

Contrary to common expectations, studies show that religion makes little difference in patterns of contraceptive use among women

of the same age and marital status; Catholics are more likely than others to adhere to the Church-approved method of periodic abstinence ("rhythm") but only a tiny majority rely on that method. Most Americans today have developed what is sometimes called a contraceptive mentality, expecting to be able to make choices about when to have children and how many to have.

By the 1970s, despite the spread of contraception, there were still problems of accessibility and safety. Contraceptives were harder for women to obtain than for men, for example; while condoms could be bought in any drug store, women's contraceptives required relatively expensive and, for many women, embarrassing requests of physicians. Contraception remained harder for young people to get. Many doctors and clinics refused to serve unmarried women until very recently. Many of these obstacles still exist. Among women under twenty, those not using any form of contraception was about 21 percent in 1982. Shame and denial and lack of economic opportunity are probably even more influential than lack of access in teenagers' failure to use contraceptives. Furthermore, several contraceptives, notably "the pill" and some IUD's, created serious health hazards and great discomfort in many women.

While contraception decreased the demand for abortion among women who used it, it did not erase the demand; women who intended to prevent pregnancy sometimes found that their preventatives had failed and sought abortions afterward. Indeed, women who were regular contraceptors were probably the most impatient with anti-abortion laws, considering them unwarranted intervention into their reproductive lives. A particular influence was the much-publicized 1962 case of Sherri Finkbine: having taken the prescription drug thalidomide, she learned that her pregnancy was likely to result in a deformed fetus and, denied an abortion in the U.S., flew to Sweden to obtain one. Meanwhile, young married women were catching up with young men in their sexual activity (causing a marked decline in prostitution).

In the 1960s, various states began repealing their anti-abortion statutes or passing reforms which regulated abortion, allowing it under certain circumstances and not others. The leaders in the reform movement of the 1950s and 1960s were primarily physicians and lawyers who came to view these laws as unnecessary and ineffective interference with personal privacy and civil liberties. They noted that abortion rates throughout the period of illegality remained high

and were probably increasing in the 1950s, and they noted great increases in the potential safety of abortion when performed legally. Some reformers were repelled by what was involved in enforcing the anti-abortion laws: there were cases of entrapment of women, of police bursting into doctors' offices and arresting doctors and women in the course of abortions, and of coercing seriously injured or dying women into revealing the names of their abortionists. They were also disturbed by the double standard in enforcement: prosperous women travelled to places where they could get legal abortions, or persuaded their physicians to do "therapeutic" procedures, while poorer women were at the mercy of an abortion black market. Furthermore, most states had never outlawed therapeutic abortions, i.e., those deemed necessary to a woman's health. From the 1940s, as the demand for abortion grew, physicians wearied of constant power struggles with their patients and their families about what constituted threats to health. More and more physicians preferred a universal, uniform policy.

With the revival of the women's movement at the end of the 1960s, feminists joined this reform campaign. In the 1970s, they re-emphasized the view that abortion was a women's issue. They argued that those who bore the burden of the results of moral decisions—i.e., the care for children—should make those moral decisions. And they believed women could never achieve educational, occupational, political or any other kind of equality unless they could control reproduction.

The Supreme Court invalidated state anti-abortion laws in its 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. This was not, however, a sudden, unprecedented turnabout. Seventeen states had already legalized abortion by then. Contrary to a much-repeated misconception, polls at the time of *Roe v. Wade* showed no evidence of polarization of public opinion about abortion.[4] The anti-abortion movement had begun before *Roe V. Wade*, however, initiated by the Catholic hierarchy which had previously been stymied in its attempts to reduce divorce and contraception. In the 1960s, the Church began "Right to Life" committees, thus coining a phrase which has been phenomenally successful, becoming the main slogan for anti-abortionists. In the late 1970s, the anti-abortion movement became more general, fed by an international religious revival, among fundamentalist Christians, Jews and Moslems, and by a "New Right," as the new wave of U.S. conservatives called themselves. Prior to 1976, non-Catholic conservatives in the

U.S. rarely mentioned abortion; since then, it has become possibly their most vocal and successful issue. By and large, Americans split about abortion along conservative versus liberal lines, just as they do in Poland, but there are exceptions that confuse the political alignments. Some liberals, usually religious, oppose individuals' right to choice (while some other religious groups are strongly pro-choice). There are some conservatives who support abortion rights, largely because they are committed to civil liberties and opposed to state interference in personal life.

Whatever one's views on abortion, the historical evidence makes several things incontrovertible. Abortion has been a widespread traditional practice in virtually all cultures and religions. In the last 200 years, a series of social changes has made abortion intensely controversial. These changes include the economic necessity for smaller families, women's—rather than children's—employment, increasing women's rights, the erosion of the sexual double standard, and the contradictory combination of increasing secularization and religious heterogeneity with a religious revival. The sources of the controversy are so profound that it does not seem likely to disappear quickly. The historical record also demonstrates that abortion is unlikely to disappear as a practice. What Americans need now to work out is the best policy on abortion, taking into account the variety of religious, moral and political values among our citizenry.

1. Angus McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York, 1978), pp. 34, 243 ff.

2. James C. Mohr, *Abortion in America. The Origins and Evolution of National Policy* (New York, 1978). Mohr also demonstrates that a particular motive in the campaign against abortion was that physicians were trying to drive out of business the traditional healers and followers of more traditional forms of medicine, such as homeopathy, who often performed abortion.

3. Mohr, p. 186.

4. Jerome S. Legge, Jr., *Abortion Policy: An Evaluation of the Consequences for Maternal and Infant Health* (Albany, NY, 1985), p. 117; Helen Rose Ruchs Ebaught and C. Allen Haney, "Shifts in Abortion Attitudes: 1972-1978," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 42, #3, (August 1980), pp. 491-99.

COMMENTARY

Abortion is an issue interwoven with notions of morality, sexuality, gender differences, illegitimacy, family, human nature, and God's will—or lack of it—in the world. It has economic implications, and consequences for demographics and social programs. It is a phenomenon that cannot be separated from the fabric of society and is therefore a powerful and divisive issue. In short, it is rich subject to explore through the humanities.

Abortion, along with infanticide (often through abandonment or neglect), has been widely practiced in the Western and non-Western world for millennia. The use of these two practices has been disputed for as long as we have historical records. Some of the stories from our past are not pleasant. But perhaps a few bits of information can give texture to the humanistic record in which the age-old abortion issue continues to be played out.

In the ancient world, abortion and infanticide were part of the debate about the welfare of society. Both Plato and Aristotle viewed them as necessary for population control, as well as the improvement of the race, and they set forth criteria for when these practices were appropriate.[1]

Until recently, it was thought that abortion and infanticide were rare in the Middle Ages because they were incompatible with Christian laws and ideas. A closer look at motifs in folktales and records of witch prosecutions suggests that these practices may not have been so uncommon. The Church established foundling homes in Milan in 787 "because there were as many infanticides as there were infants born out of wedlock," and in Rome in the twelfth century "because so many women were throwing their children into the Tiber."

Abandonment of infants troubled the church and state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well. The establishment of foundling hospitals or orphanages in northern Europe grew directly out of this dilemma. The tremendous numbers of abandoned infants and the high mortality rate led Malthus and others to comment unfavorably on these "houses of death." Disraeli was only one of a number of leaders to note that infanticide was hardly less prevalent in England than on the banks of the Ganges. Nineteenth century British literature is replete with orphans and abandoned children.[2]

In Japan, a crowded island country with no frontiers to conquer or colonies to populate, there has been social pressure on families to

have no more than two children for a couple of centuries. Yet aborted fetuses were, or are, believed to have a soul. Known as *mizuke* or water child, these souls were honored with monuments and ceremonies.[3]

The history of attitudes on abortion in this country, as Linda Gordon so skillfully demonstrates, is complex and instructive. The debate in the last twenty or thirty years has taken on a unique and peculiar character because the issues are being settled in the courts on constitutional grounds. Only in the United States do the rights of the individual loom so large in the legal system. And only by giving the fetus rights equal to those of a mother can comparable legal validity be achieved by both sides. But the abortion issue is powerful and divisive because it is a moral, economic, environmental, as well as a legal problem. There is also a strong tendency to personalize the conflict as a female, a family, or a community concern.

The humanities cannot offer definitive answers to the abortion debate. Indeed, extreme positions in the public policy arena are characterized by irreconcilable differences. Ultimately, however, if we are to reach any sort of common ground, the humanities can play a role in increasing our understanding of the issues and raising the level of discourse to a more sophisticated plane.

The controversy of the past two or three decades has encouraged a great deal of new research by scholars in the humanities. Historians and anthropologists can demonstrate that abortion takes on different meaning in different times and places. Legal scholars can shed light on pivotal cases. And arguments on both sides are articulated by knowledgeable theologians and scholars. For some, truth is absolute, and good and evil are black and white. For others the contextual circumstances influence moral decisions. These different approaches provide a wealth of ideas and information that can be drawn upon for public humanities programs.

Judith Winzeler, Executive Director
Nevada Humanities Committee

1. The classical position on abortion and exposure of infants can be found in Aristotle's *Politics*, Book 7, Chapter 16, and in Plato's *Republic*, Book 5, 460. However, the reader should use current editions. Some translations of *Politics* from the turn of the century (when popular opinion was strongly against abortion) simply omit the "questionable" four or five lines.

2. Two articles from the journal *History of Childhood Quarterly* provide fascinating information on Europe: "Infanticide: A Historical Survey" by William L. Langer (Winter 1974), and "Infanticide in Florence: New Sources and First Results" by Richard C. Trexler (Summer 1973).

3. Lawrence Tribe, *Abortion: the Clash of Absolutes* (New York, 1990). Tribe's book has an excellent chapter on "Locating Abortion on the World Map."

FOR FURTHER READING

Abortion: Understanding Differences. Edited by Sidney Callahan and Daniel Callahan

Linda Gordon. *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: Birth Control in America*

Kristin Luker. *Abortion and The Politics of Motherhood*

James Mohr. *Abortion in America. The Origins and Evolution of National Policy*

ECONOMIC PESSIMISM AND MATERIAL PROSPERITY

Michael A. Bernstein

In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider. -Ecclesiastes 7:14

PESSIMISM IS THE STOCK IN TRADE OF ECONOMISTS. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, most economic experts wondered if capitalism itself would survive. Today many of them fear that the American economy is weak and failing, destined to be a second-echelon participant in a new twenty-first-century world economic order. And that sense of foreboding is shared by the general public. Most Americans, at least of the lower and middle classes, believe that their children will not sustain a standard of living equal to their own.

To speak to anxieties such as these, it is useful to situate our contemporary concerns in an historical context. For if we think of ourselves and our era as unique, we then tend to lose perspective and embrace exaggerated ideas. Looking to the past, or to the experience of other nations in our own time, we may approach our current adversity with greater awareness and composure.

Some Historical Observations

America's worldwide economic dominance has been a very recent thing—a creature of the past half century. Until World War I, we were a debtor nation, fairly dependent on foreign capital for domestic investment projects. For example, British investors in large part financed the construction of the transcontinental railroads of the late nineteenth century. While American agriculture had, by the early twentieth century, established a prominent position in world markets—something it has never lost—American industry was still primarily focused on production for the home market. Starting in the 1920s, and continuing through the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, American industry and trade achieved the commanding international heights that we today take for granted. That economic hegemony was built, in the main, on the military and political victory of 1945, and upon the

exigencies of the Cold War: massive military expenditures, an international financial system (established by the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference) that cast the dollar in a powerful global role, and the rapid domestic growth associated with a so-called baby boom.

Having been the beneficiaries of a unique postwar political-economic framework, it was perhaps inevitable that we would feel today that things have taken a turn for the worse. But in a very important sense, this feeling is misplaced. It is not so much that the United States has now fallen on stagnant times as that other nations have at long last emerged from the devastation, reconstruction, and political turmoil left in the wake of World War II. The very success of Germany, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan is the proof of that renaissance. Indeed, it was the explicit rationale of our occupation and reconstruction plans—such as the Marshall Plan in Europe—that such economic resurgence was necessary to maintain political stability and peace. In this regard, it is striking (and indeed disturbing) that many Americans condemn current Japanese investment in the United States, when a century ago, British investment (coming as it did from a nation with which we had twice gone to war since the Declaration of Independence) was welcomed with open arms. Apparently when America was a young, rapidly growing nation, foreign investment was especially welcome, whereas today, such external funding appears more threatening and intrusive.

As foreign economies have caught up with us, it is also true that our policy-making cannot subsist within a vacuum. When we change interest rates today, for example, we affect capital flows across our borders. Higher interest rates attract foreign funds seeking better returns; lower interest sends these monies abroad in search of higher relative yields. Thus the Federal Reserve Board can no longer "peg" interest rates simply with respect to the needs of, say, the domestic housing market or the automobile industry. It must also consider how its decisions will modulate the ebb and flow of investment worldwide.

The best example of the global interdependence that has now come to characterize our economic lives is the establishment of a floating currency system. When the allied nations' financial ministers gathered in conference at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, in 1944, they were concerned to configure world trade and financial flows such that disputes could be avoided and stability maintained. Along with the creation of an International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and of an International Monetary Fund, the conference decided

to establish fixed exchange rates between the U.S. dollar and all other internationally traded currencies. The value of the dollar itself was set in terms of gold at $35 per ounce. This established a benchmark against which the value of all other currencies was measured. As the American economy was the most powerful at the time, it seemed prudent and indeed necessary that its currency play such a central international role. But by the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the American economy was seriously weakened by inflation, and as other economies became more robust, the U.S. dollar appeared less and less attractive to our trading partners as an international exchange medium. The French in fact refused to accept dollars in payment on foreign accounts by the late 1960s. In 1971, inevitably, the President allowed the U.S. dollar to float like all currencies. Thus did the Bretton Woods system "collapse"—although the institutions and procedures it formulated remain to this day.

We may yearn nostalgically for the older currency regime, when the dollar was fixed at a high level. We may even think that its fluctuating worth today is a symbol of our economic decline. But is it not as well a sign of the growing maturity of our trading partners? If we are not the undisputed "champions" of our league any longer, this is not because we have become a weaker team, but rather because other teams have become stronger. And the entire league has benefitted in certain major ways.

Even so, it is certainly true that years of global economic leadership have imposed high costs on our economy. Having grown used to a dominant market position in both the domestic and international realms, our industries are suddenly faced with younger, leaner, more aggressive competition from abroad that is often underwritten and supported by foreign governments. The Japanese Ministry of Industry and Trade, for example, has directly subsidized the efforts of electronics, automotive, and steel producers to penetrate the North American and other overseas markets. This strikes us as unfair.

Yet the Japanese (along with the Koreans, Taiwanese, and others) are merely doing what the United States government did throughout the nineteenth (and part of the twentieth) century to foster economic growth. During that time, tariff protection for "infant" industries (such as textiles and iron) was a central part of the public policy promulgated by Congress. And federal armories often provided crucial "seed money" and technological "test-beds" for new developments in the firearms, clock, and other manufacturing industries. As

the eminent Harvard University economist Alexander Gerschenkron argued some decades ago, "follower" nations will use state agencies and policies to catch up with "leader" nations as quickly as possible.[1] It is only the leader who can afford to rely on more open and freely organized markets. It is thus no surprise that Great Britain—the "workshop of the world" in the nineteenth century—could argue for free trade and often criticized a follower country like the United States for its protectionism. It may be of course that as a leading nation seemingly "falls back" to the pack, it should consider taking up various governmentalist methods to regain its lead. But we should not meanwhile criticize the youngsters around us for using strategies we ourselves once utilized at a similar stage in our economic history.

Current Policy Puzzles

If losing a relative lead on other competitors seems an unalterable part of the history of the wealth of nations, this does not mean that we must eventually lose our economic prosperity. But we face nevertheless difficult policy choices of two broad kinds. On the one side are structural riddles having to do with labor productivity and skills, managerial performance, and the distorting effects of military spending. On the other are issues having to do with restoring investment in lagging industries.

With respect to labor, it is widely believed that America's fall from economic leadership has to do with a decline in labor productivity and a loss of appropriate skills in the work force itself. While it would be myopic to argue that efforts should not be made to improve the education of working men and women, it is also misguided to ignore other factors that affect labor productivity. After all, American workers toil more hours per week, more weeks per year, and have less paid annual vacation time than any other advanced industrial work force in the world. And this impressive work intensity has been a characteristic of the national labor force since the early 1800s. Superior and more universally available education and a continual influx of immigrants ready, willing, and able to work have made and continue to make the American working population one of the most productive on record.

Other factors, while less frequently discussed may nevertheless play an important role in limiting productivity. Today, for example, our workers often employ equipment that is much older than that used by their counterparts in other industrialized settings. Steel

plants in Pennsylvania, automotive assembly lines in Michigan, and textile mills in the South are usually several decades older than those engaged in foreign production. And when, as in the case of the car industry, American workers construct products that have performance characteristics inferior to those of foreign imports, a drop in industrial profitability derives less from productivity than from design failure.

The United States also seems to suffer from wasteful and inadequate labor force deployment. A brief look at the history of employment patterns offers an example. It is worth noting that in the nineteenth century, both men and women worked—especially in agriculture—while children were often cared for by the elderly. By the mid-twentieth century, there emerged a conception of the nuclear, middle-class family that conflicted directly with these earlier notions of family employment. Men earned income while women performed unremunerated labor in single-family homes. Today many women have rejoined the wage-earning work force, but because of insufficient daycare provision, those Americans assuming a large part of the burden of child-rearing (usually and mostly women) are prevented from making the full productive contributions they might otherwise. This historical development is made all the more striking when compared with the record of other nations—including many with which we economically compete today—in which increasing government commitments to daycare have allowed a far greater proportion of the adult population to be formally employed.

Stereotyped attitudes about the capabilities of the elderly, and blatant discrimination against disabled persons sequester yet another segment of the population from full participation in productive labor.[2] Racial, ethnic, and gender biases, not to mention homophobia, similarly reduce the extent to which all Americans may usefully and productively contribute to the gross national product. Along with improvements in education and skill, we should look toward social and political reforms that lessen the deleterious impact of such labor force "segmentation." When society, for whatever reason, does not engage its labor force to its full potential, what may appear to be a productivity problem may actually be one of social attitudes and bias.

America's managerial elite may also be contributing to the deterioration in national economic performance. A focus on short-term profitability and sales, rather than long-term investment and revitalization has often been blamed as the root cause of management's failure to keep America first among industrial equals. Clearly,

America's corporate leaders have recently tended to be more concerned with financial speculation, takeover attempts, and stockholder meetings than with technological innovation and new product development. When mergers and other forms of financial "paper trading" predominate over productive investment, industry will find it increasingly difficult to maintain an edge on rivals—domestic and foreign—that focus their energies on production. Consider that this past year, the General Electric Company used reserve funds to purchase $10 billion of its own stock rather than make new acquisitions or invest in new technology. The firm held that this action was in the best interest of its shareholders, but surely the equity buyback did not result in the upgrading of productive facilities or the invention of new, more competitive products for the G.E. line.

The government has the option of bringing greater restrictions to bear on corporate mergers, financial speculation, and stock value manipulations in order to force corporate profits and savings into investment projects. The implementation of tax incentives to reward technological innovation is also a possibility, and indeed, just such a proposal was made in the 1930s at the height of the Great Depression. The problem, as one of this century's greatest economists once said, is that while "[s]peculators may do no harm as bubbles on a steady stream of enterprise...the position is serious when enterprise becomes the bubble on a whirlpool of speculation. When the capital development of a country becomes a by-product of the activities of a casino, the job is likely to be ill-done."[3] The government could make the gains of financial gaming far less attractive to management than the strengthening of their business. Such aggressive intervention in the financial structures of the national economy would mimic in many ways the efforts of foreign governments to direct the energies of their entrepreneurs and managers toward long-term growth and export trade.

But what may appear to be managerial shortcomings may also be due to government policy itself. We are now more and more aware of the fact that the peacetime consequences of the "Arsenal of Democracy" of the 1940s, 1950s, and more recent years have not all been happy ones. The military-industrial complex has not only siphoned off vast quantities of wealth and resources toward the production of weapons. It has also made a significant subset of American industry utterly dependent on public contracts. That dependency has turned management's attention away from innovative investment toward

lucrative, cost-plus government orders.

A simple historical example may serve in this regard. Throughout the 1950s the United States Air Force generously funded developments by machine-tool manufacturers for their aircraft equipment and parts inventories. By the 1970s, when German and Japanese toolmakers entered the North American market, domestic producers were at a serious disadvantage. Military design pressures for extremely complicated components left American firms ill-prepared to compete with the cheaper and more flexible machine-tools shipped from abroad. While the Americans had focused on the production of highly sophisticated, yet task-specific equipment, their foreign competitors had developed machine-tools distinguished by their low cost, simplicity, and versatility. "By 1978, for the first time since the nineteenth century, the United States became a new importer of machine-tool products."[4] Regaining our "competitive edge" as a national economy will no doubt have a lot to do with our success at "economic conversion"—moving from a large commitment to military-industrial enterprise toward peacetime production.

All this notwithstanding, concern with foreign competition should not blind us to other important domestic matters such as the problematic distribution of income among Americans. Unemployment and the social and personal despair that it brings deserve to be the primary target of fiscal and monetary management—not some imagined footrace with other economies. Besides, when the economic pie is more equally and inclusively divided, as numerous studies of consumption spending have shown, the general level of expenditures rises. With that rise comes higher firm profitability, greater commitments to investment and expansion, and more employment. We must not let stronger foreign economic competition divert attention from a resolution of these urgent domestic economic problems. Solving them would actually raise GNP and the growth-rate, and thereby serve to improve our overall global competitiveness.

Prophecy and the Economic Problem

Sixty years ago, in the midst of the Great Depression, John Maynard Keynes found time to ponder some "Economic Possibilities For Our Grandchildren."[5] Far from being pessimistic—even at that difficult and frightening moment—Keynes believed that the future would ultimately yield greater and greater levels of material welfare. "We are suffering," he wrote in 1930, "not from the rheumatics of old

age, but from the growing-pains of over-rapid changes, from the painfulness of readjustment between one economic period and another."[6] But despite that optimism, he also found cause for worry. For the question of how increasingly affluent human beings would behave had been ignored due to the serious economic problems of the day. Keynes wondered if, given greater prosperity, humanity would know "how to use [the] freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for [it], to live wisely and agreeably and well."[7]

We are certainly far from the state of economic utopia that Keynes envisioned. But his warning should not go unnoticed. He was right to caution us "not [to] overestimate the importance of the economic problem, or sacrifice to its supposed necessities other matters of greater and more permanent significance."[8] When we worry about the relative strength of our economy as compared to others worldwide, we should also look to the future and consider what kind of society, beyond one of material things, we wish to build and bequeath. We should ask what a contest for national economic leadership is *for*. We should even dare, along with Keynes, to imagine a prosperous and secure future in which we will be free

> to return to some of the most sure and certain principles of...traditional virtue—that avarice is a vice, that the exaction of usury is a misdemeanour, and the love of money is detestable, that those who walk most truly in the paths of virtue and sane wisdom...take least thought for the morrow. We shall [then] once more value ends above means and prefer the good to the useful. We shall honour those who can teach us how to pluck the hour and the day virtuously and well, the delightful people who are capable of taking direct enjoyment in things, the lilies of the field who toil not, neither do they spin.[9]

1. Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 1962).
2. A very promising development occurred as this essay was being drafted. On May 22, 1990, the House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed the Americans With Disabilities Act which, among other things, would give disabled persons greater access to employment. With Senate approval already obtained, the President signed the bill on July 26.
3. John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment Interest and Money* (New York, 1936), 159.
4. See D.F. Noble, "Command Performance: A Perspective on Military Enterprise and Technological Change," in M.R. Smith, ed. *Military Enterprise and Technological Change: Perspectives on the American Experience* (Cambridge, 1985), 343-44. The quoted sentence has been transposed.
5. John Maynard Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," in his *Essays in Persuasion* (New York, 1932), 358-73.
6. Ibid., 358.
7. Ibid., 367.
8. Ibid., 373.
9. Ibid., 371-72.

COMMENTARY

When the state humanities councils were founded in the early 1970s, the National Endowment for the Humanities required each council to focus its program on public policy issues in the context of a statewide theme. The Michigan Council for the Humanities chose "The Michigan Economy: A Humanistic Understanding of Production, Consumption, and Leisure." Humanities scholars were challenged to draw upon the methods and substance of their disciplines to provide historical and cultural perspectives, thoughtful analysis, and penetrating questions which would broaden and deepen the discussion of economic issues and the impact of policy alternatives on the quality of life. Sometimes this worked to everyone's satisfaction; sometimes it did not. Success depended on the communication skills of the scholars, and above all, on their willingness to reject the temptation to use the podium as a bully pulpit for espousing personal views. The best programs demonstrated that the humanities have a vital role in illuminating public issues.

In "Economic Pessimism and Material Prosperity" Michael Bernstein gives us a fine example of what an outstanding humanities scholar can contribute to the discussion of fundamental problems facing the American economy. His thoughtful, well-constructed plea for an informed and balanced discussion of the challenge of regaining the competitive edge provides historical context and offers an antidote to the excessive pessimism with which we now view our economic prospects. He reminds us that our "world-wide economic dominance has been a very recent thing." He further reminds us that if we are to meet the challenge squarely, we must look to our values and our prejudices, "for what may appear to be a productivity problem may actually be one of social attitudes and bias."

By invoking the words of John Maynard Keynes, the most influential and gifted of twentieth century economists, Bernstein reminds us of humane values ("that avarice is a vice...") which may run counter to material considerations and which, by implication, we would do well to keep before us in our quest to regain the competitive edge. Most important of all, he asks us to be reflective, to "ask what a contest for national economic leadership is *for*" and to "consider what kind of society, beyond one of material things, we wish to build and bequeath." In effect, he urges us to self-examination, to a critical assessment of our values, hopes, and dreams, as well as of our public

policies, so that we can shape a future in which we will truly want to live.

Although the humanities cannot describe this future, they may help us in the process of discovering it by encouraging us to ask and to attempt to answer questions which emerge naturally out of our national character and our experience of the past. As the critic Northrop Frye has suggested, "the rear view mirror is our only crystal ball."

If we wish to bring our values and our history into the discussion, then the best place to begin may be to inquire into the status of the "American Dream." What have we meant by the "American Dream" in the past? What do we mean by it today? Does it mean being a winner in a game of winners and losers? Is winning the lottery the ultimate realization of the dream? Is there an American dream for America as well as for the individual? What would we like the American Dream to stand for in the twenty-first century?

In *Maggie's American Dream: The Life and Times of a Black Family*, James P. Comer, M.D., Professor of Child Psychiatry at Yale University and an effective reformer of the schools, evokes in the story of his family (particularly of his mother, Maggie Comer) what the pursuit of the American Dream has meant in the past in one of its more impressive manifestations. The story of the Comers is a story of loyalty and unselfishness, hard work, the courage to engage in a protracted struggle against heavy odds, and a determination that sons and daughters acquire to the utmost the qualities of character and the levels of education needed to continue the struggle and to become eminently successful citizens. Reviving the work ethic, improving basic skills and upgrading high tech skills are presented to us by the Public Agenda Foundation as our national choices for regaining the competitive edge. If we look first at these three choices and then at the Comers, we find that the choices are inseparably integrated into the values and relationships of that particular family. They are mutually supportive dimensions of the Comers' pursuit of the American Dream.

To address a problem of the complexity of regaining the competitive edge, it is necessary to organize the topic into manageable parts and to acknowledge the necessity of choices among policy alternatives. If this were not done, then we would be left by default with the implicit defeatism in Robert Heilbroner's and Lester Thurow's statement that regaining the competitive edge "will require a thousand Band-Aids for each of a thousand wounds." But we should not only try to understand the problem in its parts, we should also look for a way to see it whole.

Is there a comprehensive vision or angle of approach which will help us grasp the problem as a whole and thereby focus our responses where they will have the greatest overall impact? It seems to me that the underlying message in *Maggie's American Dream* and, indeed, the values represented in the pursuit of that dream (and in similar quests of millions of other Americans) suggest a promising way for us to see and attack the problem as a whole. Quite simply, this message is that we need to look at persons more than at policies and that when we look at policies we need first and foremost to look at those which nurture persons.

When we ask what kind of workers we need to train for the twenty-first century, we should broaden the question by asking what sort of person we need to educate to cope successfully with the challenges of the next century. And here, it seems to me, we must turn to the humanities. Everyone will agree that this person needs basic skills. Most will agree that he or she should be encouraged to develop higher level skills to the limits of his or her abilities. And all would agree that this person needs to become a conscientious and self-disciplined contributor to the workplace. But it would seem that this person will need much more. In an economic universe which is extraordinarily complex, interdependent, and demonstrably fragile (as the crisis in the Middle East reminds us once again) will not this person need a new level of understanding in order to participate successfully in a multicultural workplace in a multicultural world?

Focusing education too narrowly has always run the risk of training buggy makers for an automotive age—or, perhaps in this latter day, of bringing up Americans who are handicapped by ignorance, racism and xenophobia and thereby rendered incapable of dealing successfully with a changing world. The humanities are critical to understanding the world in which we live and do business. It is through history, literature, languages and the arts that we enter into our own heritage, into commonalities and rich diversities of American life. The humanities are our best windows on the world. It is through them that we can come the closest to entering into the minds of those with whom we must live and deal both across the street and across the planet.

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FOR FURTHER READING

Michael A Bernstein, *The Great Depression: Delayed Recovery and Economic Change in America, 1929-1939*

Barry Bluestone, Bennet Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industries*

Robert W. Degresse, Jr., *Military Expansion, Economic Decline: The Impact of Military Spending on U.S. Economic Performance*

David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States*

Alvin H. Hansen, *Full Recovery or Stagnation?*

Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*

Sidney Ratner, James H. Soltow, Richard Sylla, *The Evolution of the American Economy: Growth, Welfare, and Decision Making*

Robert B. Reich, *The Next American Frontier*

Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*

F.W. Taussig, *The Tariff History of the United States*

EQUALITY FOR BLACK AMERICANS

Eric Anderson

"As a nation, we begin by declaring 'all men are created equal,'" Abraham Lincoln wrote to a friend in 1855. "We now practically read it 'all men are created equal, except negroes.'"

Dismayed by the rising power of nativism, Lincoln added in his 1855 letter that some Americans would rewrite the Declaration of Independence to read "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners and catholics."

"When it comes to this," he confessed, "I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty—to Russia for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy."

Lincoln's words remind us that the question of racial equality, far from being an issue invented in 1954 or 1963, has been with us from the beginning. Today's discussions of American race relations can be illuminated by debates initiated in Lincoln's generation or earlier. Even people who are determined to focus on present practical matters in evaluating the prospects of black Americans often end up arguing about the real meaning of the American Revolution and those glittering words written by a slaveowner: "All men are created equal."

By his comments, Lincoln showed himself a typical American in other ways. Americans then and now are quick to invoke comparisons with other nations, either to rebuke our countrymen or rationalize our shortcomings. In addition, Americans are typically confused about the subject of "progress."

Lincoln was sure that progress for American blacks had stalled in the 1850s. Indeed, he argued that their status was rapidly deteriorating. In a speech given in Springfield in 1857, he criticized Chief Justice Roger Taney for assuming that "the public estimate of the black man" had risen since the days of the Revolution. "This assump-

tion," said Lincoln, "is a mistake." Although the condition of Afro-Americans had improved "in some trifling particulars," he insisted that "as a whole, in this country, the change between then and now is decidedly the other way; and their ultimate destiny has never appeared so hopeless as in the last three or four years."

In fact, according to one historian, the civil and political status of northern blacks was steadily improving over the three decades before the Civil War. Most northern blacks had freedom of movement and the right to testify in court—as well as the right to contract and sue. They enjoyed growing legal protection against kidnapping, increased educational opportunity, the broad freedom to speak, to publish, and to agitate for change. Northern blacks also had considerable liberty to establish schools, churches and other cultural institutions. "On the eve of the Civil War," says this historian, "the pendulum was swinging in favor of more black rights in the North."[1]

Lincoln's ideas about progress may have had more to do with his expectations for the future than his analysis of the past. And when he described the discouraging "ultimate destiny" of blacks in America, he had in mind all blacks, not just the free minority. Lincoln was especially disturbed by the implications of the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision (1857). A misunderstanding about America's Revolutionary heritage, he believed, threatened the freedom of all Americans, white or black.

Scott v. Sandford (the "Dred Scott case") became one of the most important lawsuits in American history. On the surface, it involved the attempt of one obscure black man to gain his liberty, but in the overcharged atmosphere of the time, Dred Scott the individual was swallowed up by Dred Scott the symbol. The Supreme Court, dominated by southerners, attempted to use the case as a way of permanently resolving the vexed question of slavery in the territories. Did Congress have the right to limit slavery, to keep "the peculiar institution" from expanding, as the new Republican party demanded? Could a black man be a citizen of the United States, with a standing to sue in federal court? How should the nation's commitment to equal rights be interpreted?

Led by Chief Justice Taney (1777-1864), the Supreme Court ruled that Scott was still a slave, his status controlled by Missouri law. Moreover, no Negro, free or slave, could be a national citizen, even if he was a citizen of particular state. In the name of equal rights, Taney went on to declare that Congress had no power to prevent a

slaveholder from taking his property into the territories.

According to Justice Taney, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence had not been intended ever to cover blacks, free or slave. At the time of the American Revolution, blacks "had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect," Taney asserted.

Lincoln strongly objected to this view of the Revolution and Constitution. As he understood them, the Founders said that all human beings were equal in their "inalienable" right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Jefferson and his associates meant to declare this equality "as a standard maxim for a free society," hoping that "the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit," though they failed to act at once against the institution of slavery. Pointing to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 (which banned slavery in the old Northwest) and the provision in the Constitution allowing for the prohibition of the slave trade in 1808, Lincoln argued that "the framers of the Constitution intended and expected the ultimate extinction" of slavery.

It may not be an exaggeration to say that all discussions about equality for black Americans are tied to this basic question: "Which man was right about the Founders?" When Martin Luther King and Malcolm X argued about "integration" and reform, behind their disagreements were contrasting judgments about America's founding. Was the United States based upon enlightened ideals, as King stated, and needing only to live up to its commitments, or were American values warped in their origins and impossible to salvage, as Malcolm X claimed? Similar questions have arisen time and again in American history, from the 1840s argument among abolitionists over the Constitution (was it a "covenant with death" worthy to be repudiated?) to the 1960s revisionist view of Lincoln as just another white supremacist.

The issue has been urgent because either answer has entailed crucial judgments about what sort of progress is possible or desirable. If Lincoln was right, then progress toward equality can be achieved by appealing to the central ideas of the American experiment. If Taney was right, then blacks cannot be incorporated into American democracy without major revision or even repudiation of the Founders' philosophy.

In the argument about the Founding Fathers, Lincoln and Taney each have had some surprising allies. For example, the first black jurist appointed to the Supreme Court, Thurgood Marshall, recently denounced the Constitution as "defective from the start" because it was based upon "outdated notions of 'liberty,' 'justice,' and 'equality.'" Accepting as accurate Taney's interpretation of the Declaration of Independence and the intentions of the Founders, he moved on to conclusions quite different from those of the author of the Dred Scott decision. The framers of the Constitution, far from enunciating timeless principles, demonstrated a "wisdom, foresight and sense of justice" that was not "particularly profound," Marshall concluded.[2]

Lincoln's view of the Founders, on the other hand, received a curious affirmation from Alexander H. Stephens (1812-1883), the vice president of the Confederate States of America. In a speech just before the Civil War broke out, Stephens criticized Jefferson and "most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old Constitution." They were mistaken, he said, in their belief "that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, politically." Though slavery was an evil "they knew not well how to deal with...the general opinion of men of that day was that, somehow or other, in the order of Providence, the institution would be evanescent and pass away..."

Frederick Douglass (1817?-1895), the nation's most famous fugitive slave, also supported the view that the Founding documents were essentially anti-slavery. In a brilliant, bitter Fourth of July oration in 1852, Douglass told a white audience: "This Fourth of July is *yours* not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, but *I* must mourn." The reason lay not in any defective principles of the Revolution, but in the "hollow mockery," deceit, and hypocrisy of American practice. In the Constitution, he asserted, there was "neither warrant, license, nor sanction" of slavery. Properly interpreted, the Constitution was "a glorious Liberty Document" designed to establish justice, secure liberty, and promote justice—not protect slavery.

There is no unanimity among historians about slavery's role in the founding of the Republic—"the witch at the christening," to borrow one historian's metaphor.[3] Some scholars emphasize the inconsistency and self-serving behavior of the men who wrote the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. Noting especially the contradictions in thought of Thomas Jefferson, John Hope Franklin, historian of the South and the African American experience, offers this judg-

ment: "For all its emphasis on natural equality and liberty, the ideology of the American Revolution was not really egalitarian."[4]

But if the Founders had been indifferent to slavery, historian William Freehling has argued, the slave trade might have continued indefinitely and slavery would not have been confined to the South. As it was, from the Revolution onward, slave holders were on the defensive in relation to the "rights of man." Freehling argues that "the abolitionist process proceeded slowly but inexorably from 1776 to 1860: slowly in part because of what Jefferson and his contemporaries did not do, inexorably in part because of what they did."[5]

Whichever view one endorses, it is certainly incorrect to assert, as Taney did, that the Constitution "distinctly and expressly affirmed" slavery. To a modern reader the remarkable thing is how carefully the authors of the Constitution avoided the words "slave" and "slavery"—even in the clauses discussing fugitive slaves or southern representation. Perhaps the institution of slavery so directly contradicted the principles of the new nation that the Constitution-makers were afraid to recognize it openly. It would be wrong, James Madison explained, "to admit in the Constitution the idea that there could be property in men." Just why Madison felt this way is worthy of long, careful reflection. Was the author of a famous book on the Dred Scott case right: "It is as though the framers were half-consciously trying to frame two constitutions, one for their own time and the other for the ages, with slavery viewed bifocally—that is, plainly visible at their feet, but disappearing when they lifted their eyes."[6]

For Lincoln, the argument about the Founding Fathers and slavery had direct, practical implications. He believed that freedom for whites was related to freedom for blacks. Any scheme to spread slavery would, in the long run, threaten ordinary white laborers and farmers. His attack on slavery was based not on abstract compassion for the slave but on the basis of the most elevated self-interest. As he told Congress in 1862, "in giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free."

His opponents (North and South) believed that black emancipation could only come at the expense of the white majority, that racial equality threatened the commonweal. Similar ideas thrive today, though they are seldom explicitly expressed. Justice and equity, many people seem to assume, involve penalty, painful sacrifice, and compensatory discrimination. Blacks are demanding something that can only be *taken away* from whites.

But are these unexamined assumptions really true? Or is it more accurate to say that racial prejudice injures the general welfare—by arbitrarily depriving the nation of talent, experience, wisdom? Although Lincoln himself did not recognize the full implications of his ideas, was he not correct in believing that injustice was dangerous for everyone, even oppressors and apathetic bystanders?

In making the point that equality for black Americans is not a new issue, an historian risks going too far. Certainly, many of today's problems would sound familiar to Frederick Douglass or Abraham Lincoln or influential scholar/activist W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963). But that does not mean that American race relations in 1990 are adequately summed up in the style of the book of Ecclesiastes: "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be...and there is no new thing under the sun." If racial equality is an old problem, it is not an unchanging one. At various times in our past, there has been rapid, dramatic progress for blacks (as during Reconstruction), disastrous retrogression (as in the "Jim Crow" years between 1890 and 1915, which saw the rise of "separate but equal" doctrines) or merely stagnation.

A Rip Van Winkle of 1910, awakening today, would find many features of American race relations familiar. In 1990, as in 1910, blacks as a group are poorer, less educated, more crime-ridden than most other Americans. Blacks still feel the "twoness" described by DuBois in 1903: "an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings."[7] Non-black Americans in 1990 are quick to generalize about blacks and are almost as eager to anoint one spokesman for "all of them" as in the days of Booker T. Washington (1856-1915). As in 1910 there is still an odd nomenclature dance about Americans descended from Africans, if the terms have changed a bit: "colored," "African American," "black," "Negro," "Afro-American." A white Senator from Mississippi in 1910 and a Chicago black separatist in 1990 are equally capable of discussing racial matters in a preposterous language of paranoia, attributing fantastic malice to almost every member of the other group.

Still, a man awakening from an 80-year sleep in 1990 would be surprised by some things. Even an optimist of 1910, such as Booker T. Washington, would be pleasantly surprised to discover that lynching has disappeared in the America of 1990—although, of course, disturbing forms of interracial violence persist. Black voting and office holding are taken for granted, even in the Deep South. No one is

startled or disturbed that the commander of the United States military is a black man. "The White Problem in America," as *Ebony* magazine once called it, is now seen as a national problem, instead of a southern deviation. Public racism of the sort that flourished among whites in 1910 is no longer respectable. Interracial marriage, once a frightening peril solemnly invoked in public discussion, has ceased to be a political issue. More and more, "white oppression" has lost its position as the obvious and easy explanation for a host of perplexing inner city problems, ranging from drug addiction to family instability.

Indeed, Americans are sometimes tempted to congratulate themselves. Surveying a world full of tribal and ethnic and religious conflict, ranging from South Africa, India, and Malaysia to Ireland and Lebanon—not forgetting a European continent newly hostile to dark-skinned immigrants in the West and boiling with cultural conflict and nationalist aspirations in the East—the United States appears to be a reasonably successful multi-racial society.

Some thoughtful foreigners hint that we are suffering from social hypochondria, and they wonder why we are so reluctant to admit progress. An English observer of the American scene, recently quoted in the British journal *The Economist*, commented: "There are few countries on earth in which people are generally less prejudiced about color than America, stereotypes of the old South and Bensonhurst notwithstanding. Yet there are few countries where the issue looms so large; where pressure groups are so quick to take offense at a careless remark, or where words are made to carry such a weight of meaning."[8]

There is a danger, of course, that the recognition of significant success can degenerate into claims of perfection. We might ignore complaisantly the daunting problems that even the optimists admit are still there. More important, the foreign comparisons are in some ways simply irrelevant. Equality, as John Hope Franklin has reminded us, is a value deeply imbedded in American law. "One either has it or does not have it," he points out. "Thus it is scarcely germane to the central point to observe that blacks are better off now than they were a half-century ago or that they are better off here than they are in Zambia or in Mauritania."[9]

The real question is not "Are other nations doing worse?" but "Are we living up to our own ideals?" It is a hard question, with troubling answers. For Americans who seek progress in the achievement of racial equality for blacks, the best starting point is still

Lincoln's. We threaten all freedom, including our own, if we add any "except" clauses to the simple statement, "All men are created equal."

1. Paul Finkelman, "Prelude to the Fourteenth Amendment: Black Legal Rights in the Antebellum North," *Rutgers Law Journal*, XVII (1986), 415-482.

2. Thurgood Marshall, "Reflections on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution," *Harvard Law Review*, CI (1987), 2-4.

3. William M. Wiecek, "The Witch at the Christening," in Leonard Levy and Dennis Mahoney, eds., *The Framing and Ratification of the Constitution* (New York, 1987).

4. John Hope Franklin, *Racial Equality in America* (Chicago, 1976), pp. 12-15.

5. William W. Freehling, "The Founding Fathers and Slavery," *American Historical Review* LXXVII (1972), 81-93.

6. Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York, 1978), p. 21

7. W.E.Burghardt DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; Greenwich, Connecticut, 1961 reprint), p. 17.

8. "America's Decadent Puritans," *The Economist*, July 28, 1990.

9. Franklin, *Racial Equality in America*, p. x.

COMMENTARY

"For while the tale of how we suffer and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell; it's the only light we've got in all this darkness."
James Baldwin, *Sonny's Blues*

Nowhere is the perspective of the humanities more urgently needed than on the terrain of race relations. From the eighteenth century onward, the meaning of freedom has churned at the heart of the American experiment in democracy. It took a Civil War, one of the bloodiest conflicts in our history, to put freedom for black Americans on the national agenda. One hundred years later, through a renewed civil rights movement—a major legacy of the Civil War and its aftermath—we were reminded that racial equality and justice may be a dream deferred but not forever denied.

As Eric Anderson points out, the story of race and freedom is rooted in the American experience. It grows out of and shapes our history, politics, culture, and literature—the humanities texts and traditions of the American people. And so long as its ending remains unwritten, so long will the story's text continue to grow—almost, one is tempted to say, into epic length.

For while the story of race and freedom is integral to our collective history, it is not yet fully integrated into it, and so it also constitutes another dramatic narrative. This narrative of racial injustice and economic inequality, of a "flawed democracy," runs concurrently alongside the story Americans of every race, class, ethnic background and gender want fervently to share—the story of America as the land of the free, a beacon of democracy and hope to the world.

Out of the conflict between these rival but related narratives, as Eric Anderson notes, emerged what W.E.B. DuBois articulated as the "twoness" of the African-American experience. Emphasizing the need for an African identity, pride in one's heritage and self-determination, DuBois at the same time recognized that the important question was not how to blend one identity into another, but how to give voice to and validate the particular historic experiences of black people and then how to relate these to a shared past.

More than eighty years later, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, in a lecture entitled "How to Be a North American," made a similar appeal using a similar metaphor to describe the experiences of all

Americans. MacIntyre argued that "one has to have two identities: one that of an American, sharing the common life and contributing to it, and the other that of one's own particular ethnic background." MacIntyre also believed, much like DuBois, that an American needed to understand himself or herself at one and the same time in terms of both. "One needs, that is to say, to have two dramatic narratives from which one can draw in entering upon the present."

On the terrain of race relations the metaphor of "twoness" has special relevance. It holds the possibility of finding common ground among differing, even opposing points of view. But such a possibility rests largely on the uses we make of history, literature, philosophy, anthropology, the history of art and music. Without reference to these texts it is difficult if not impossible to address the major questions related to this issue, how to arrive at a broadly shared consensus on racial justice and bring the story of race and freedom to some satisfactory conclusion.

In a public humanities lecture sponsored by the D.C. Community Humanities Council, literary scholar Eleanor Traylor juxtaposed the reactions of James Baldwin, the black writer from Harlem, and of his countryman Henry Adams, scholar, man of letters, and descendent of John Adams, to the great cathedral of Chartres in France. "We come to Chartres," Adams said, "for our ideals." To the contrary, for Baldwin, Traylor noted, the cathedral evoked another voice: "The Cathedral at Chartres...says something to the people of this village which it cannot say to me; but it is important to understand that this Cathedral says something to me which it cannot say to them."

What the cathedral said to Baldwin was that he did not belong to the traditions it symbolized; it reminded him not of American ideals but of black Americans' exclusion from Western culture and the specter of an alienated African past. As black poet Lucille Clifton has written, "They ask me to remember but they want me to remember their memories and I keep remembering mine." Baldwin understood the importance of heeding his own memories and insisted as well that the rest of us tell the common story in a way that acknowledged his.

In order to move ahead on the racial agenda for the 1990s, we need to understand what Chartres said to James Baldwin. That is, we need to hear the stories of African Americans from their point of view. To do this we need to become familiar with the abundant but often neglected literary texts, historic documents, oral histories, and cultural traditions of Americans of African descent. We need to

immerse ourselves in the African American legacy in the humanities and, through the kinds of public programs the state humanities councils support, ensure that this legacy reaches the broadest possible audiences.

Into the dialogue we can then bring our own stories, the stories of native Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and ethnic Americans from almost every country in the world. Such a dialogue will provide the common ground needed to arrive at a consensus on public policies that address the persistence of racial inequality. And all of us will benefit. Any remedies regarding racial justice will affect not only America's 29 million blacks, but also 19 million people of Hispanic origin, 4 million Asian-Americans, 1.5 million native Americans, and other racial and ethnic minorities.

The particular stories of the American people will say to us something different than what Chartres said to Baldwin. They will reflect the dual narratives of all Americans in a way that neither is lost and both are enriched. We can then begin to conclude the story of race and freedom. We will draw from our dual identities, our two dramatic narratives, in entering upon the present.

Francine C. Cary, Executive Director
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FOR FURTHER READING

Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice.*

Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder*

Taylor Branch, *The Parting of the Waters*

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*

W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*

Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*

Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*

Alex Haley, ed., *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates*

Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*

August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915*

Thomas Sowell, *Ethnic America*

Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*

Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*

C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*

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